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ABSTRACT

Several issues should be considered in selecting assessment instruments and procedures for use in adult literacy programs. Teachers must consider the purpose of the assessment; the appropriateness of the assessment instrument for adults; the reliability, validity, and practicality of the instrument; whether the assessment is culturally sensitive; and whether the assessment instrument is congruent with the instruction given. An effective assessment model for adults consists of several different types of assessment, giving the instructor a multiple view of the adult's literacy achievement and instructional needs. A selection of the following types of assessment can be used with adults: standardized, norm-referenced tests; other reading tests; locally developed measures; workplace and other functional literacy assessment; job or life simulation; work samples; observation of students; informal reading inventories; and follow-up of students. An assessment model for adult populations needs to include multiple sources of data, using instruments and procedures that are appropriate for adults and that adhere to the principles of assessment. Assessment is used for planning instruction and can help the student see progress and be motivated to remain in the program. (KC)

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ASSESSMENT MODELS & INSTRUMENTS: ADULT POPULATIONS*

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Issues Relative to Adult Literacy Assessment

There are several issues and considerations important in selecting assessment instruments and procedures for use in adult literacy programs.

Purpose for Assessment

What is the purpose for assessment in the adult literacy program? Why is the assessment being done? There are several purposes which might be considered.

1. Placement. Frequently testing must be done when an adult enters the literacy program to determine which level class the student should attend and to select the level materials to be used for initial instruction. A screening or survey test may be used for this purpose, but the information gained is very general; e.g., is the student on the basic, general, or pre-GED level.

2. Planning for Instruction. More commonly instructors need information about the adult's level of functioning in reading, writing, oral communication, computing, and problem solving in order to plan an instructional program for that student. Criterion-referenced scores will be most useful in order to compare the students' level of achievement with predetermined objectives in each area of literacy. Of importance in planning instruction, also, is the students' literacy goals.

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3. Diagnosis. An indepth diagnosis of the students' literacy functioning is rarely possible or appropriate in an adult literacy program. Adults with learning disabilities may profit from such a diagnosis if specialized instruction can be provided based upon the diagnosis. The state might consider regional diagnostic centers equipped with personnel trained in reading diagnosis and psychometry. Adult literacy centers could refer adults who do not profit from the usual literacy instruction to such centers for diagnosis. Diagnosis is not worthwhile, however, unless appropriate specialized instruction is possible.

4. Program Evaluation. For reporting and accountability purposes the state needs pre- and post-assessment of the students in each literacy program. Norm-referenced standardized tests which compare the adults to other adults in literacy programs nationwide are most appropriate for this evaluation. Ideally, each student would be tested at the beginning and end of their instructional program. In adult literacy programs, however, adults often drop out with no notice and can, therefore, not be post-tested. In order to solve this problem, it is recommended that regular testing be done every few weeks so that a record of student progress exists even if a post-instruction test can not be given.

Appropriateness for Adult Populations

Every assessment instrument used in an adult literacy program must be appropriate for use with adults. The content of the test should be material of interest to adults including the vocabulary, topics, and illustrations. The format should not be school-like,

and the norms should be developed on adults. That is, the population on whom the test was developed and standardized should be adults in a wide variety of literacy programs. The norms also should be appropriate for adults (standard scores or stanines) not grade or age scores. Grade level scores are inappropriate because they do not represent equal intervals, small increments are not meaningful, and they relate to developmental reading instruction with school materials, not adult reading instruction with adult materials.

Reliability, Validity, & Practicality

All assessment measures, formal and informal, must be reliable; that is, they must provide consistent results across administrations and examiners or observers. They must also be valid; that is, they must measure what they say they do. Tests with written directions present a problem for adults who do not read. The test should measure literacy as found in their everyday life, not school literacy. Functional literacy (every day reading and writing) and workplace literacy are examples of adult reading tasks. Finally all assessment should be practical; the time to administer and score the test, the cost, and the ease of use are all important. Good assessment is integrated into instruction, not separate from it.

Culturally Sensitive

The assessment instruments must be sensitive to the background experiences of the adults. They must use vocabulary and concepts and include topics familiar to adults. Illustrations, content, and

language should be familiar. Especially important is sensitivity to language dialects and to language demands for limited English proficient individuals.

Congruent with Instruction

A test that meets all the above criteria may still be inappropriate if it is not congruent with the model of literacy instruction being used. Frequently tests assess specific skills based on a model of reading that is hierarchical and sequential. Such tests are inappropriate for use with whole language, integrated literacy instruction programs and with workplace or functional literacy programs. Assessment must match the instructional model to be appropriate and useful.

Assessment Instruments & Procedures

An effective assessment model for adults consists of several different types of assessment giving the instructor a multiple view of the adult's literacy achievement and instructional needs. Never should a decision about instruction be made on the basis of one assessment or one test score. A selection of the following types of assessment can be used with adults to gain a composite view of their literacy needs and progress.

Standardized, Norm-Referenced Tests

Published standardized norm-referenced tests developed for and normed on adults usually include measures of reading, writing, and computation. The most well-known are the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE). These measures have adult content, use adult populations, have

overlapping levels of difficulty, have survey (placement) tests, and meet the basic measurement criteria. However, there are some concerns about these tests. All too often they are used as the sole assessment procedure, an inappropriate practice at best. They are very school-like and have grade level norms neither of which is appropriate for adults. More seriously they fail to take account of the adult's background and experiences. Reading comprehension is heavily determined by the amount and extent of one's prior knowledge and experience about the topic to be comprehended. The more experience you have with something, the more divergent your response. Recent study of the TABE notes that paragraphs are functionally written and invite the adult to relate the topic to her/his own experience, BUT the test items are traditional leading to confusion on the part of the adults (Hill, 1988). What is needed is functional test items that draw upon the depth of experience the adult has even though s/he is not literate. No standardized test currently does this.

Other Reading Tests

There are many other reading tests which measure one aspect of reading such as vocabulary recognition (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test) or oral word reading (Slossen Oral Reading Test). Many of these commonly used in adult literacy were normed on child populations with school objectives (Stanford Achievement Test) or are a very broad quick survey (Wide Range Achievement Test). All of these tests have limited usefulness due to these characteristics. Several functional literacy measures are

available for adult populations (Reading Everyday Activities in Life, PALS Functional Literacy Test, & Adult Performance Level). Tests are being adapted for administration on computer. This format may be a less threatening, more acceptable format for adults and should be given consideration.

Locally Developed Measures

Many adult literacy programs have developed their own reading, writing, and oral communication measures. These measures can be tailored to the specific adult literacy program, e.g., family, functional, or workplace literacy curriculum. However, each must be carefully developed and meet the criteria of reliability and validity.

Workplace & Other Functional Literacy Assessment

By using content materials from the job or from real life situations, assessment instruments may be developed to measure literacy performance congruent with the curriculum. Reading can be assessed by a Cloze test (deleting every 5th word of a passage; the student either replaces the word or selects a replacement from four alternatives which are the same part of speech as the word omitted). These measures depend heavily on the individual's background knowledge about the topic. That may be an advantage for workplace or functional assessment. Such tests are valid for instructional assessment but not for job placement. Similarly a writing sample from the work situation or a real life situation (e.g., applying for a job, writing a note to their child's teacher) may be used as an assessment of writing. These should be scored

for communication (clarity of ideas, logical sequence, description, completeness). They could also be scored for mechanics (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar) but that score should be separate. The purpose of the written communication is expression of ideas, not mechanics.

Job or Life Simulation

In this assessment an actual situation is developed in which the individual must use reading, writing, oral communication, computation, and problem-solving; e.g., on the job or to complete a task. A checklist must be developed to assess the success of the individual in each of these aspects of literacy while performing the task. For example, the adults might be asked to role play customer and worker at a fast food restaurant; locating and packing an order in a warehouse; or reading a form from the school and completing it with the requested information for a conference with the teacher.

Work Samples

Portfolios of materials read, oral reading or oral communication tapes, and writing samples kept over time provide an on-going record of progress throughout instruction. If these are dated and kept on a regular basis, they provide evidence of progress for both the student and teacher. They may also be used as an assessment of progress for students who drop out of the program without a post-test.

Observation of Students

Instructors may keep checklists or anecdotal notes about each students' progress, motivation, attitudes, attendance, materials selected for reading, and other evidence of literacy activities both in and out of class. These notes, kept over time, provide another assessment of the student's progress particularly those aspects that are difficult to measure with paper-and-pencil assessment tasks. Students can be interviewed to determine their personal goals for literacy, their self-assessment of progress, evidence from their lives of the effects of their growing literacy attainment, and plans for future literacy instruction or education.

Informal Reading Inventories

These instruments provide graded passages which the student reads aloud. Their reading is coded and comprehension questions are asked following reading. The older type of informal reading inventory coded reading errors (e.g., Silvaroli); the newer type codes reading miscues (e.g., Goodman). For example, when the student substitutes a word in the passage, the word substituted is noted. It is then determined if the substitution is acceptable semantically; that is, does the passage make sense with the substitution. Next it is determined if the word makes sense grammatically. Finally, it is determinied if it is correct on the grapho-phonic (letter-sound) level. For example, if the passage says, "The truck rolled down the road." and the student reads, "The truck rolled down the street." The substitution (street for road) makes both semantic and grammatical sense, but is incorrect on the grapho-phonic level. The student's comprehension of the passage

is not damaged, however. Assessment of oral reading using a miscue analysis gives the instructor a good sense of the student's comprehension of the passage and tells whether or not the student is attempting to make sense out of the passage or merely to call words.

Follow-up of Students

A final assessment is to follow-up students several months after instruction to determine what happened to them. How did the literacy instruction affect their lives? their jobs? their families? It may be difficult to locate students, but valuable information about the effects of the literacy program can be obtained from this follow-up.

An Assessment Model for Adult Populations

Literacy assessment for adult populations needs to be with mulitple sources of data using instruments and procedures that are appropriate for adults and that adhere to the prinicples of assessment. In adult literacy programs, there is the need for on-going assessment that is merged with the instructional program. In this manner, assessment is used for planning instruction, is available even if the student drops out of the program, and can be used to help the student see progress and, thus, be motivated to remain in the program.

Note: This paper is adapted from a presentation given at the 1989 Assessment Issues Forum sponsored by the Georgia Office of Adult Literacy in Macon, GA on November 29, 1989.

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